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Children who learn a dialect differ in pronunciation, syntax, or both from children who learn standard English. It has been assumed that dialectal differences contribute to difficulties in learning to read. Another question is whether a disadvantaged child who speaks a dialect is exposed to a language environment rich enough for him to make normal progress within that dialect. Preschool language programs have been trying to eliminate dialectual pronunciation difference so that children will be better prepared for the first grade. Although it is agreed that a social class prejudice against dialect exists, there is no agreement as to whether dialects reflecting substandard grammar are a hindrance to thinking processes. European children who speak regional dialects use standard language at school without resulting learning deficits. Experimental work is needed to identify and plan for the use of certain syntactical systems in remedial work with preschool children. (MS)

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PROBLEMS OF DIALECT

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This paper is a summary of a discussion on problems of dialect brought out in a language conference sponsored by the National Laboratory on Early Childhood Education, Chicago, May, 1967.

Many of the children of the poor learn a dialect that is radically different from standard English. The dialect may be regional; a white Cajun child from the Mississippi Delta may speak a dialect different from that used in rural Maine or the mountains of Tennessee. Or the dialect may have ethnic overtones, as is the case with some children in the Virgin Islands and Hawaii, and with Puerto Rican and Negro children. Involved may be differences of pronunciation (weathah for weather), or of syntax ('t' aint no good), or of both ('t' aint no good shinglin' weathah).

A rather generally accepted assumption has been the dialectal differences, both those involving pronunciation and those involving syntax, can contribute to difficulties in learning to read. The prediction is that the child who says, "Did you get 'Ref' (Ralph) to come down to 'hip' (help) you?" may have trouble in recognizing certain regularities in pronunciation when the "l" sound appears in a position other than in the middle of a word. Even greater will be the difficulties of the child, it is assumed, whose syntax is radically different from the standard English of textbooks, The child who says, "Dat mine," may find the wording of his primer, "That is mine," to convey little meaning to him.

Participants at the conference brought out a number of interesting points with respect to the significance of dialectal differences. It was reported that these are investigations underway trying to find out which, if

any, deviations in pronunciation affect reading. One hypothesis is that only when the meaning is changed do the deviations make a difference. Often in dialect final consonants are either dropped or simplified. Where the final consonant is an inflection, the meaning is changed if the consonant is changed or dropped. "I talk to him" means something different from "I talked to him." On the other hand, some deviations may not involve a change in meaning. The "have" in some dialects may be pronounced so that it is almost indistinguishable from "hair" or "hand", but it may be that the words constitute a set of homonyms which would present no more difficulties to the child than "son" or "sun" do to the rest of us. Homonyms take on their unique meaning from the context and given the "son" out of context, no one would know whether "son" or "sun" was intended.

Actually we do not know whether children who speak a lower-class dialect have merely a different set of homonyms or whether they have a greater set. If the set is greater, then pronunciation may constitute an additional burden to the child who speaks a dialect. Preschools at the present time are spending an enormous amount of effort trying to eliminate dialectal differences in pronunciation on the grounds that the children will then be better prepared for reading in the first grade. We need more evidence on the effects of dialect, so that we can focus in intervention programs on the things that really count.

Problems of syntactical differences were also discussed at the conference. One problem arises because of social attitudes toward a dialect employing substandard grammars. That there is a social class prejudice against such dialects is obvious, and this prejedice is often stated as a reason

for changing dialectal grammars to make them conform to standard English. The argument is advanced that is a person is going to participate in the fullest possible sense in American society, he must be able to speak standard English. Occasionally the Twiggies speaking Cockney English receive wide acceptance, but most Elizas must be able to drop their dialect, if substandard, to move into the middle-class, either black or white. Sometimes, the change in language habits brings rejection by the primary group, and as a result change is resisted; observers report that some black adolescents refuse to learn standard English because they do not want to talk like whitey.

While there is agreement over the social problem arising from dialectal differences, there is little agreement over the question of whether or not dialects employing a substandard grammar are a hindrance to thinking processes. The assumption is generally held that such a simpler form of language and therefore is less useful as a tool of thought. Psycholinguists, however, dispute this assumption. Reference was made in the discussion to an article by Klima on "Inter-Relatedness on Grammatical Systems." Klima analyzed literary English, the spoken of Churchill, and two dialectal variations, in terms of the kinds of rules that account for the particular grammatical systems being employed. He showed that it is not the case that one is simpler than another, but simply that there are different ordering rules. In some dialects in this country, there is a distinction made between "He sick" or "He tire," which refer to the immediate present, and "He be sick," or "He be tired" which means that he is chronically ill or tired

all the time. It is obvious that such distinctions are as difficult to learn as "He's sick," and, "He's busy all the time," and that the rules governing the one case are not inferior or less demanding than the standard form.

It was pointed out in this connection that most European countries have regional dialects differing both in pronunciation and grammar from the standard dialect. Children in such countries learn the standard language in school but continue to use a dialect outside, and no one expresses great concern over the matter nor are learning deficits resulting from use of the dialect reported.

A special case is often made of the omission of the copula (the verb "be" used to connect subject and predicate) in some Negro dialects. Sentences such as "Dat mine," "Who dat?" "He dat big" which omit any form of the verb "be" to connect the two parts of the sentence are fairly common. There are intervention projects that place a great deal of emphasis upon teaching the copula on the grounds that its use fosters notions of equivalence and thus contributes to logical thinking. Certain reservations were expressed at the conference about such an emphasis. There is a danger in thinging that, because the child who doesn't have the copula also has other deficits, there is a causal relationship between the two, and that, if one teaches the copula, one will at the same time correct other deficits. Actually, it was pointed out, the copula does not carry much semantic information; some languages like the Russian leave it out. While its use is of interest, its omission may not signify a serious cognitive deficit.

Some interesting points with respect to the verb "be" were brought out in connection with the intensive longitudinal study of three young children

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carried on at Harvard. The children's first and occasional use of the copula at around two years of age was a limited one; it always appeared in a sentence with a pronoun subject and never with a noun phrase subject. While one might think that its appearance signified great understanding on the child's part and that the child had analyzed use of the copula in the language system, a much more likely explanation is that first use of the copula is rather a superficial one. The child acquires "he's" just as he acquires any new word. An analysis of four hours of the mother's speech addressed to each child revealed that the child heard the copula used almost exclusively with a pronoun. Furthermore, each child heard only scattered pieces of the system, with one mother using the past tense a few times in a short period of time while another used only the present. It is only at a later period in development that there is a radical reorganization of language with the whole auxiliary-verb system coming into play at once, in addition to "be" in its copular use. At this point, "be" becomes free of its tie with the pronoun and is used with noun phrase subjects as well. From a scattered range of examples, the child must and does abstract the underlying system.

The whole area of dialectal differences still contains a number of unsolved problems. While reservations were expressed about whether or not such differences contribute to a cognitive deficit, there still remains the question of whether disadvantaged children speaking a dialect are exposed to a language environment rich enough so that they can make normal progress in the dialect. We need data on this point. We also need more experimental intervention programs in which the dependent variable is carefully and precisely described. To say that the teacher will use language in connection

with every experience in the nursery school and will carry on as many one-to-one conversations with the child as possible is not sufficiently descriptive. However, an experimenter might, on the basis of his analysis of the pre-schooler's language, identify certain syntactical systems for remedial work. Suppose the system were the use of the verb "be." The experimenter could then list all of the possible forms of "be" in past, future, and other tenses, in the interrogative, the negative, the singular and the plural. In each experimental session with the child, the adult could respond to a child's utterance with a remark that used some part of the system. The responses would be systematically selected from the total list of possibilities, so that the child would be exposed to the whole system and the dosage increased systematically. From the results of such experimental work, intervention programs could be planned for maximum effectiveness.